The Platform and the Box Office

By THOREAU CRONYN.

SIR HENRY M. STANLEY, lecturing in this country in the winter of 1890-91, talked to 110 audiences, who paid $287,070 to hear and see him. He took back to England a net profit of $110,000, or $1,000 a lecture. This was nineteen years after he found Livingstone, but he had just explored Africa a third time and great was his fame.

Charles Dickens came here in 1867 in some trepidation because of the fun he had had at our expense in "American Notes" and "Martin Chuzzlewit." He caught cold and endured the continuous discomfort of what he called "the true American catarrh," but he gave seventy-six readings, the gross receipts of which were $228,000 and the average $3,000 an evening. After every expense was paid his personal net profit was £19,000, or $133,000 in our money, as a pound sterling was worth $7 at that time. His gain would have been larger if he had been willing to accept United States currency. Doubtful of it, he converted the currency into gold, then at a premium of 39½ per cent.

These records, Stanley's and Dickens's, have never been equaled on the lecture platform, although among the lions that have come to roar upon our shores since then have been many of distinction. The foreign invasion has been steady and, we may assume, profitable, for most of the visitors, having once confronted American audiences and escaped with their lives and checked the count at the box offices, have been eager to return. But it is interesting to note that the really Barnumesque earnings are not of the gilded present, but of fifty-five years ago in the case of Dickens and thirty-two in the case of Stanley. It is easily possible that a few modern celebrities may have got more out of a single lecture or a short series than the two here mentioned, but none has come up to them as regards sustained performance and total winnings.

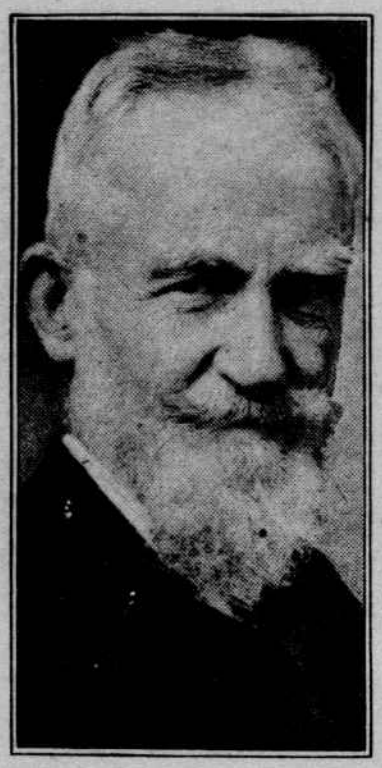
Popular taste, say those enterprising lecture agents who have to appraise it, runs in cycles. The successful manager has to be as good a judge and interpreter of shifting currents as a weather forecaster. James B. Pond, whose father, the Major, managed the tours of Henry Ward Beecher, Matthew Arnold, Mark Twain, Bill Nye and many others, recalls that before the war there was a long period in which explorers and travelers were uppermost. This was the era of Peary, Cook, Paul Rainey, Buffalo Jones, Amundsen and Commander Evans, who told the story of Scott's tragic effort to reach the South Pole. Concurrently there was, as Mr. Pond views it, a "literary cycle," with visits from Masefield, Alfred Noyes, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and others. This still continues, but was most marked just before the war.

Before, during and since the war every lecture manager of large ambition has tried to lure George Bernard Shaw to the United States, and some of them haven't given up yet, although it is understood now that Shaw will never come any more than Rudyard Kipling will return. Of all the foreigners who could enrich themselves and their agents by merely dropping across the Atlantic and opening their mouths Shaw is regarded as the surest bet. We know of one specific offer made to him of $2,500 apiece for eighteen lectures, which he could easily give in a month if he chose, and probably he has received higher bids. Shaw says he can't see any reason why he should come to the United States. In addition he regards himself as too elderly and, more important, he doesn't need the money, which, no matter what one hears to the contrary, is what brings most of the gifted aliens here.

George Moore, after resisting American blandishments for half a lifetime, had agreed just before the war to come to America, but the submarines put him off, and as he is now 69 years old it is doubtful if we shall see him in the flesh. The war also stopped Maurice Hewlett from coming. On the other hand it was at least indirectly responsible for the return of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. His belief in the manifestation of life after death was quickened by messages attributed to his son, killed in the war, and he felt that the war had placed the people in a receptive mood for his message.

Another celebrity upon whom American beguilement has been wasted is Max Beerbohm. He sends word he is happier where he is and can't talk in public anyway. Knut Hamsun, one time Milwaukee street car conductor, who won the Nobel prize for literature last year, also declines to cross the Atlantic. His reason is that he doesn't speak good English. Possibly he has in mind the unhappy experience of Maurice Maeterlinck, who thought he had phoneticized his French into the American language, but whom his audiences found so unintelligible that he folded his wings and flew back to Belgium.

The war interrupted a flow of poetry from writers thereof who found profit and sometimes pleasure in reading their verses to the multitude. The moment this stream



G. Bernard Shaw doesn't need the money, even if it is $2,500 a lecture, and therefore won't come.

was shut off the war lectures started. Ian Hay (Major Ian Hay Beith) was among the first of those to whose personal narratives of combat the public gladly listened. Then along came Arthur Guy Empey, Private Peat, Major W. A. Bishop, British flying ace; John Masefield, describing this time rather than reading, and a host of others. Among them came a group of strictly war poets, including Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Nichols. Next inevitably followed the prophets of reconstruction and the "new world" which was to be fashioned out of the wreckage, but which seems, like the good time comin' for Nicodemus the slave, to be long, long, long on the way. This wave lasted long enough for Sir Philip Gibbs, Coningsby Dawson, Blasco Ibanez, Gilbert K. Chesterton and others to have their say, and, in fact, has not yet subsided.

The war and post war problems having given Americans a new interest in international affairs, they are not yet surfeited, lecture managers report, with men and women "who can come here and enlighten us and make us understand." That is the present principal phase of the lecture business, as some of the managers see it—a demand for authoritative treatment of international relations.

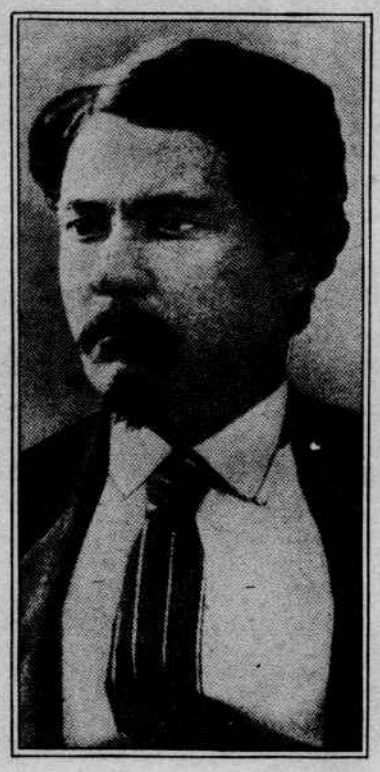
There is also a continuing interest in noted writers. Hugh Walpole, for example, feels justified in coming back this winter to lecture on "The English Novel of the Twentieth Century," "Novel Writing and Novel Reading," "Psychology and Fiction" and "Books and Friendship."

We independent Americans keep on getting excited about foreigners, even without titles, but the bureau managers say we are more exacting than formerly. It is getting so that we expect a lecturer not only to have a reputation and a "message" but to know how to deliver the message. In this respect audiences have been badly fooled in certain instances. Ordinarily the visiting celebrity has not been wholly to blame. He has been tempted beyond his strength and ascertained too late that a handsome contract, bountiful publicity and a luscious advance sale do not commonly correct defects of language, voice or manner overnight or change an ugly duckling into a swan.

There is also the type of lecturer who is capable enough but comes to grief through failure to take American crowds seriously. And occasionally there is one who fails through no fault of his own. A famous young Englishman was tortured while here by headaches. Unlike Dickens, who was ill throughout his tour but upon whom a public meeting had a tonic effect, so that he was always at his best at the reading desk, this young Englishman felt worse than ever when he faced an audience. According to the American custom the management always placed a pitcher of ice water within reach of the lecturer. As he talked he dipped in his fingers now and then, clutched a piece of ice and held it to his brow. Seeking further relief, he dipped one wrist and then the other in the pitcher, and on one occasion he absentmindly—or maybe he didn't mind—poured himself a glass and drank of the water which had just contributed to his distinguished ablutions.

The spectators were ignorant of the headaches, and the gallant young Englishman wouldn't permit them to be told. They thought the ice water business was all la-de-da mannerism. Though entertaining, it was not what they had paid for, and as it diverted attention from the substance of the lecture the celebrity fell short of the expected measure of success. He is still a first class fighting man with the typewriter, but as a lecturer he is at present contemplating another visit to the United States.

Gambling as they have to do on the vagaries of public taste, managers of lecture bureaus must be good judges of human nature, as well as careful observers of what is going on in the world. The best of them confess that they can't always tell what the public wants and they have no way of asking the public. College boys on the bleachers can howl concertedly between football quarters "We want beer!" and it's safe to say they do want it, but no way has been discovered of getting the public to yell out its mental desires. Lee Keedick, who has brought many notable foreigners to America in recent years, says he gets lots of letters from patrons who express a wish to hear So-and-So, but



Sir Henry Stanley in 1890-91 talked to 110 audiences, who paid $287,070.

he finds them not very helpful, for the reason that the average petitioner is anxious only to hear some lecturer in his own special field who might have nothing to say of general interest. Physicians want to listen to great physicians; clergymen to great clergymen, and so on.

"Americans are supposed to have an especially keen appetite for public lectures," Mr. Keedick says, "but so far as I can discover they do not differ in this regard from people the world over. Everywhere men and women like to sit and be entertained or enlightened by one speaking with authority. If we had a Mark Twain he would draw just as big audiences in Europe now as the greatest Europeans have drawn over here. Capt. Amundsen had a fine tour in this country in 1913, but when he went to Germany he did even better. Sir Rabindranath Tagore had a good reception here on his first trip, but the second time he unintentionally gave offense and was rather a failure. Yet when I was in Germany in 1919 they were making more of a fuss over him than we ever did. Peary had good audiences in Europe. The man who has achieved something worth while and has a happy way of telling about it is in demand everywhere."

Mr. Keedick sees no reason to revise his opinion, voiced some time ago, that the "war lecture" will find no market for several years to come. He thinks that when popular interest in the war revives, as it is bound to do eventually, the secret history of the conflict rather than stories of fighting will be sought after.

We have already referred to the fact that American gold is not always sufficient to entice foreign lecturers away from their native lands. For many years Charles Dickens was numbered with these. When he finally did come, in order to place his family beyond the reach of poverty, he had an experience the like of which has not been known in our day. Think of lines of ticket applicants stretching half a mile from the box office, of hundreds of persons lugging mattresses from their homes and sleeping on the pavements in order to be sure of getting an opportunity to listen to a man read stories which could have been bought for a dollar or two and enjoyed in comfort at home! We have seen something like this on the eve of world series baseball games, but never of lectures or any other kind of entertainment provided in public halls.

Tickets for the first readings in Boston were put on sale in November, 1867, at $2.

"Intending purchasers," wrote Dolby in his book, "Charles Dickens as I Knew Him," "sent their clerks, servants and others to take their places outside the store of Messrs. Ticknor & Fields, . . . supplying each of them a straw mattress, blankets, food and in many cases with tobacco and creature comforts of an alcoholic description."

The receipts for the four readings in Music Hall were $14,000. Speculators, who were as rapacious then as they are now, got as much as $26 for a ticket. The scenes in New York when the sale was opened for readings in Steinway Hall were even livelier.

"My hotel was within fifty yards of the scene of action," Dolby reported, "and the shouting, shrieking and singing of the crowd suggested the night before an execution in Old Bailey."

Tickets for the first four New York readings brought more than $16,000. Speculators exacted enormous premiums. One of them got $50 and a brandy cocktail for two tickets for three readings.

Dickens's state of health was such that he had to decline nearly all offers of hospitality. He could not sleep at night and ate little. An egg beaten in sherry and taken every night between parts of the reading helped him to get through. He visited Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Syracuse, Rochester, Hartford, Providence, Worcester, Springfield and New Bedford, but gave up the idea of going to Chicago, and again cut down his schedule.

He sailed for England on April 22, 1868. He gave a series of readings in England the following winter, further impaired his health by the nervous force he put into the murder scene from "Oliver Twist," and died of apoplexy on June 9, 1870. Dickens's "readings" were such only by the convenient use of that term. He acted all the parts and gave a first rate dramatic entertainment. Macready, the tragedian, hearing in his old age Dickens read "Nancy and Bill Sykes," entered the novelist's room, and leaning on the arm of Dolby and glaring at Dickens finally said, "All I have to say is: Two *Macbeths!*"

Dickens's son, Alfred Tennyson Dickens, came from Australia to lecture in this country in 1912. On January 2, 1912, he died of heart disease at the Hotel Astor.